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SUBJECT: SWISS CABINET ELECTIONS: UELI MAURER TO
REPLACE DEFMIN SCHMID; FINANCE MINISTER MERZ ELECTED
PRESIDENT FOR 2009

UELI MAURER ELECTED TO FEDERAL COUNCIL

¶1. (U) Swiss People's Party (SVP) candidate Ueli Maurer was elected December 10 by a joint session of the Swiss Parliament into the seven-member Federal Council (Executive Cabinet). In what was expected to be a narrow contest, Maurer won by a single vote, garnering 122 of the 243 valid ballots cast. Former Justice Minister and SVP figurehead Christoph Blocher, who in addition to Maurer was nominated by the SVP as a candidate for the position, withdrew his candidature after receiving only 54 votes in the first round of voting.

¶2. (SBU) Reflecting the polarizing nature of the Blocher and Maurer candidacies within the Parliament, the Socialist, Center-Left, and Green MPs voted largely for SVP MP Hansjoerg Walter Q a "wild card" candidate who was not nominated by his party for the position. Walter generally is viewed by the SVP's political opponents as more moderate than Maurer, who is closely associated with the SVP's aggressive campaign style Q and electoral success - of the past decade.

¶3. (U) Following his election to the Federal Council, Maurer thanked the Parliament for its support, saying his election represented a "yes" in favor of the Swiss political tradition of consensus. He commented that he was pleased that the People's Party was now back in the government. Meeting soon after the election, the Federal Council announced December 10 that Maurer will assume the duties of outgoing Defense, Civil Protection, and Sport Minister Samuel Schmid at year's end.

UELI MAURER: BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

¶4. (U) Ueli Maurer (58) is married and has six children. He has been a MP (National Council) since 1991 and had served as president of the national SVP party for 12 years before stepping down in February. In August he was elected president of the Zurich cantonal chapter of the SVP. Outside of politics, he has professional experience in the agricultural sector, and over the years has managed several farmers associations in the Zurich area. He is president of the Swiss vegetable producers' association.

¶5. (SBU) Ideologically very close to SVP party guru Christoph Blocher, Maurer was a leading force in the aggressive campaign strategies of the SVP over the last decade in which the SVP ultimately became the strongest political force in the federal and cantonal parliaments. He is known to be opposed to Swiss military foreign missions. Maurer also opposes the

extension of the Swiss-EU agreement on the "free movement of persons" to Romania and Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the Swiss tradition of forming coalition governments comprised of representatives of all the major political parties requires much compromise and consensus. Pundits expect therefore that Maurer will be compelled to support (or at least not contradict) Federal Council decisions, whatever his personal views. That largely should ensure continuity in Swiss policies of interest to the USG.

FINMIN MERZ ELECTED SWISS PRESIDENT FOR 2009

16. (U) As was expected, the December 10 joint session of Parliament elected Finance Minister Hans-Rudolf Merz (FDP) to be the Swiss president for 2009, making him first-among-equals in the seven-member Federal Council. The Swiss presidency primarily is a ceremonial responsibility that rotates annually among the members of the Federal Council, with candidacies based on seniority, but still requiring parliamentary confirmation. Merz (66) underwent emergency heart surgery in September and returned to the FinMin job in November. In the December 10 election he received 185 out of 209 valid votes. He will succeed his FDP party colleague Pascal Couchepin as president. Christian Democratic (CVP) Federal Councilor and Economic Minister Doris Leuthard was elected vice-president with 173 out of 198 votes. In Swiss practice this will set up Leuthard to be elected president for 2010.

CARTER